

Holy Land Christians in Profile

Khalil Doughbaje

Khalil Doughbaje is a lawyer working for the Society of Saint Yves which is a Catholic Human and Civil Rights legal aid organization serving the poor and marginalized of the Holy Land. He is soon to complete his ninth year with the Society while at the same time serving as a volunteer project officer with the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land.

Khalil was interviewed by Fr. Peter Vasko.

Fr. Peter: Khalil, tell us a little about yourself.

The most important thing to know about me is that I am a Christian Palestinian. I was born in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1971 after it had been occupied, annexed to Jewish West Jerusalem, and the State of Israel. That says it all, Father, because it tells you that I was born under the rule of a foreign army thus I have never known freedom. But I know a different freedom because I am a Christian. I was born just a few hundred meters from the Church of the Holy Sepulcher which commemorates where Christ freed us all through His resurrection.

Before 1967 my family was quite wealthy; owning lands inside the Old City walls and agricultural lands in the village of Taibeh, which is in the northern West Bank to the east of Ramallah. Now those lands are occupied by and under Israeli military rule. After I passed my high school exams I received a scholarship to study Law at the University of Kiev in what was then, the Soviet Union. The scholarship was a great help but not enough to survive, so my family made many sacrifices to help me complete my studies. After graduating with a Master's degree in Law, I went briefly to visit family who had emigrated to Canada and the United States. While I was there my parents contacted me and told me that my time was running out and if I didn't return immediately I would be forever prohibited from returning to Jerusalem. Not only could I not return as a resident but it would also be difficult for me to come back even as

a tourist or visitor. I came home.

Fr. Peter: Can you give our readers a background of the Society of Saint Yves and how you got involved in the organization?

The Society of Saint Yves began in 1991 as a Canonical Lay Foundation to serve the poor and the oppressed of the Holy Land by providing legal advocacy on their behalf. St. Yves was the brain child of Mrs. Lynda Brayer, a lawyer and a Jewess who converted to Catholicism. In early 1999 I received a phone call from a life long friend, Raf-foul Rofa. He asked me if I would like to work for the Society where he had been employed the previous year. When I returned from North America it was very hard to find a job, particularly in my field of law. I had to start earning money fast and giving back to my family some of what they sacrificed for me to earn my education.

Times were hard and I was working nights and days in the hotel industry in the western part of the city. When I arrived at the Society's office in Bethlehem it was in chaos because they had just lost a staff member. It was exactly the kind of atmosphere I didn't want to work in but I felt it was exactly where I was supposed to be, so I stayed. I did my apprenticeship under Lynda Brayer who taught me a lot. She was tough and she was a thinker but more than anything else she was a fighter! Up until that time the Society didn't take many cases, probably only about 40 or 50 a year but after the present Intifada started in September 2000 things began to change rapidly.

Fr. Peter: What are some of the typical cases that you represent in the Israeli courts?



We divide the cases into classifications mainly because of the different legal strategies and methods that have to be employed to bring them to a satisfactory conclusion. All the cases stem from the same problem; the occupation and illegal annexation of East Jerusalem to the State of Israel. The occupation gave rise to the Israeli government's sweeping policy of discrimination against the Palestinian population in order to encourage the people to emigrate. We represent clients whose houses are under threat of demolition in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank. We also represent people whose lands have been confiscated to build illegal settlements or the huge infrastructure of roads that join up those settlements.

The Society represents people whose families have been torn apart by new political borders which never existed before and which are unilaterally imposed and enforced by the Israeli military. These military controlled borders divide families and prevent husbands and wives from living together and children from caring for aged and infirm parents. They prevent people from attending family funerals and